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ABSTRACT

PROBE, Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education, is a program designed to assist people, primarily women, who are reentering the labor force or school after working in the home for a number of years. Funded by the Higher Education Act, Title I, and administered by The Pennsylvania State University, PROBE is based in Dauphin County Library, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The program has two primary components. The counseling/networking component includes information/referral counseling, a job availability service, a resource center, workshops, and support groups. The business/industry component consists of employer contact, information sharing luncheons, and seminars. During the first year (May 1978-April 1979) contact has been made with approximately 850 people. The majority of participants have been women. More women than anticipated have recent job experience, but they want or need job or career changes. PROBE is seen by these participants as being able to help by (1) giving information, (2) one-to-one counseling, and (3) job hunting, self-awareness, job survival, and family engineering workshops. (Author/YLB)

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# PROBE :

# TOWARD MEETING THE NEEDS OF THE REENTRY WOMAN

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Alice hasn't worked for twenty five years. She does not need to work. In fact, her husband is resisting any change that might interfere with his accustomed lifestyle. Alice is dissatisfied and bored with her life now that the children are grown. Even though she has successfully done challenging volunteer work for several organizations, she has little self confidence. She needs someone to listen and to provide feedback and information so that she can gain confidence in her abilities.

May has many interests. Part time jobs and volunteer activities have provided opportunities for trying a variety of tasks. May would like a full time, permanent job. But, she feels scattered. How can she focus her energy? How can she make a decision?

Dee has developed many skills during her years of raising children, managing a home, and working in her church. Dee wants to translate this experience into terms relevant to the work world. She needs to assess how she would fit into a position.

Connie's husband has left and wants a divorce. This crisis has left Connie confused and insecure. She is now faced with the necessity of supporting herself and her two children. The problems of day to day living and the emotional turmoil have put Connie in a position of needing on-going encouragement and support from people who understand her situation.

Pat needs a job yesterday, but she doesn't know how to go about finding one. With some practical information Pat feels



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she could locate a position. The job market has changed during the ten years Pat has been a homemaker. She needs help writing a resume, locating possibilities, learning what to expect from an interview, and developing other job search skills.

These women are typical of the women who have participated in activities sponsored by PROBE during the past year. Their need for on-going support, confidence building, self assessment, decision making skills, and information and training in job search skills are reasons behind the very existence of PROBE.

PROBE , Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education, funded by the Higher Education Act, Title I and administered through Penn State University, was designed to facilitate the reentry to the labor force or school of people who have spent a number of years working in the home.

In 1975 at the request of the Provost at Capitol Campus,Penn State University, Dr. Kathryn Towns and two Graduate Assistants, Lee Brennan and Laura Landman began what was known as the Women's Project. They worked with community people to assess the needs of women returning to work or school. A one day conference was held for women in the Harrisburg Area. Additional work was done with Rie Gentzler as Graduate Assistant. The culmination of all of this work was the receipt of the grant to fund the PROBE Project.

On May 1, 1978 in a corner of the Children's Room in the Central Branch of the Dauphin County Library, Harrisburg, PROBE began operation. The library location was chosen because it was conveniently located and offered a relaxed, non-threatening atmosphere. An added fringe benefit was the opportunity to use the branch libraries to hold meetings and workshops.

By doing this people from a wider geographic area are reached.

The Program itself has two primary components. The counseling/networking component includes information/referral counseling, a job availability service, a resource center, workshops and support groups. The second component, business/industry is designed to work with employers in an effort to increase their receptivity to hiring reentry women. This component is important because without available employment the counseling/networking component cannot be effective. The business/industry component includes personal contact with employers, information sharing luncheons, and the development of seminars for employers. A more detailed description of each component and its part will provide a better picture of the working of the program.

Counseling/Networking Component

Counseling services take place in the PROBE office in the Central Branch of the Dauphin County Library, 101 Walnut St., Harrisburg, PA. Information/referral counseling offers one-to-one contact either by telephone or in person. The needs of the client dictate the course of the session or sessions. In some cases there is a specific problem to be solved. For example, a nurse who had not worked for a number of years wanted to know where she could read current material in her field. A call to the library of the local hospital got her access to the desired material. Many times there is no specific problem but rather a need to explore options both in terms of self and possible employment and training. Interest tests, goal setting and decision making techniques, resume development, job hunting tips, specific suggestions about people to contact, and possible solutions to encountered

problems are some of the areas which are part of this exploration process. At the end of each session the client should have several ideas to pursue.

Sometimes the client receives information about a job opening. This is the purpose of the job availability service. Facts about each client who is looking for work are placed on file. When an employer calls or sends in a job opening, it is placed on the bulletin board and clients qualified for the position are called and given the details of the opening. It is then the responsibility of the client to follow-up on the lead.

In addition to the job opening service, other information is available in the office. Books, pamphlets and articles about local employers, area educational and training institutions, financial aid, career decision making, and personal development comprise a resource center for client use.

Another primary activity of the counseling/networking component is the workshop program. During the first year three approaches were tried. An eight week series was run in the fall, four one session workshops were held in the winter, and a small group, five week workshop met in the spring. All of these focused on an aspect of reentering the labor force.

The fall workshop series of eight weeks was held in its entirety at three different branches of the library. Resource people from the community were used to provide a variety of opinions and high quality presentations. The four themes of this series, self awareness, job search, family engineering, and job survival have become key areas around which much of the counseling and other programs are planned.

Therefore, they will be described in some detail.

In making any change, the initial ingredient is awareness of self. What are my goals? What are my values? Where do I see myself five years from now? These are the kinds of questions which the participants in the first two workshops explored.

The third and fourth sessions were spent looking outward at the opportunities in the job market. Skills important for finding the "right" job were presented. These included information interviewing, resume writing, interviewing skills, and tips on locating jobs.

Closely associated with locating the job is the solving of the family problems which arise when a woman returns to work or school. Family engineering involves organizing and planning for day to day living and unexpected emergencies. For example, arrangements must be made so that the orthodontist appointments which can only be scheduled in the middle of the day are kept while Mother is at work. Ways to avoid trying to be superwoman were also considered during these sessions.

The final topic, job survival, covered areas from legal rights to getting along with co-workers. Discrimination, sexual harrassment, and how to deal with them were discussed. Ways to communicate effectively with co-workers and to work as a team were considered.

These four topics and the workshop presentations were evaluated positively. It was felt that the topics were a good basis for designing

variations for future workshops.

The winter workshops explored job possibilities. Each of four topics were covered in a session. Again people from the community served as expert panel members. The titles of the workshops were "I Have a Degree But What Can I Do?", "Starting Your Own Business", "What's New in the Office?", and "Three Career Possibilities - Travel, Real Estate and Banking". These workshops reached people with a wide variety of interests and skills.

Still another approach to the same theme was taken with the spring workshop. This time a five week program entitled "Getting the Job You Want" was offered. The registration was limited and individual help was given in goal setting, resume writing, and job hunting.

The workshops provide valuable information, but women also benefit from sharing and getting support from other women. To meet this need, support groups called Return were run in five libraries during summer, 1978. These groups brought together women who had similar problems. During the winter and early spring PROBE and the Harrisburg Women's Center sponsored a similar group which now meets twice a month.

All of these programs are geared to people in the process of reentering or expanding their roles in the work force. As was mentioned earlier, it is also essential to work with employers. It is important to advocate for the hiring of reentry women and the advancement of women within the organization. It is to these ends the the Business/ Industry

component is geared.

Business/Industry Component

Contact was made with area employers. A questionnaire was sent, but there was a limited return. Personal visits proved to be a more effective way to gather information but were very time consuming. The goals were to get employment information and to explore the possibility of providing a program for employees.

A suggestion from a corporate executive in a local company resulted in a different approach to reaching employers. Instead of going to visit people individually, representatives of companies were invited to lunch. The first information sharing luncheon was held in December. Two representatives from each chosen company were invited. At the luncheon the PROBE program was explained and employers were requested to provide information about their firm, notify PROBE of employment opportunities, and contract to have a training session for their personnel. The response to the invitation was not large, but the people who did attend have been most helpful. Several are now serving on the advisory board. Others are willing to have clients see them to get job information. The results were encouraging enough to make the information sharing luncheon a regular part of the program.

One Affirmative Action Seminar was presented for managers and supervisors at a local industry. Material was presented on the position of women in the work force, attitudes and expectations concerning women workers and ways to overcome bias against women employees.

An on-going contact with employers occurs through the job availability service. Some companies send job openings weekly. Others call regularly. Still others are willing to accept applications at any time and notify PROBE when they will be hiring.

Even though there are not as many parts to the business/industry component, that does not negate its importance. Getting information about hiring procedures directly from the people who are doing the hiring has proved valuable. For example,being able to discuss with a client the kinds of questions that will actually be asked is more beneficial than merely repeating something from a book. Also having material about companies in the office assists people in preparing for interviews. The impact that PROBE has had on attitudes toward hiring reentry women has not been evaluated.

There are other aspects of PROBE that have not been explained here. The research and groundwork necessary to establish and maintain the referral system, the tracking of clients, the sharing of information among clients through a network and newsletter, the use of volunteer interns in the office, and speaking to clubs and organizations are other necessary parts of the program. Considered now will be who the program has served and the impact it has had.

Impact

It was estimated that during the first year the program would reach 200 people. From May 1, 1978 to April 30, 1979 contact was made with approximately 850 people. There were 207 one-to-one counseling clients.

Workshops were attended by 265 people. Support groups had 50 members. The estimated number who attended programs presented to organizations is 210. Business contacts through personal visits, the luncheon, and seminars were approximately 110 people. It is impossible to estimate the people who were reached by media presentations.

When anticipating the people who would participate in the program, it was expected that the majority would be (1) woman, (2) considering reentering the work force or seeking additional training, (3) presently not employed. The majority of the clients were women. Five office clients and several workshop participants were men. The women clients were at various stages from beginning to think that they would make a change in the next few years to having been actively seeking employment for some time.

It was found that there were more women with recent job experience than was anticipated. Frequently, employment during the past five years was part time, temporary, and/or sporadic. In cases where women were employed full time, they came to PROBE because they wanted or needed to change jobs of careers. Often their life situations had changed and they needed to earn more money. For instance, a divorced mother of two, employed in a department store, came to PROBE because her salary and support payments barely covered expenses and her present job offered no opportunity for promotion. Women, like this, who were experiencing separation, divorce, widowhood or other crisis necessitating lifestyle changes were more numerous than anticipated.

Other facts about the clients have been determined. The age breakdown was as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| 21 to 25 years old | 20 |
| 26 to 30 years old | 30 |
| 31 to 35 years old | 30 |
| 36 to 40 years old | 29 |
| 41 to 45 years old | 17 |
| 46 to 50 years old | 29 |
| 51 to 55 years old | 15 |
| 56 to 60 years old | 5 |
| 61 + years old | 6 |

Twenty six of the people did not indicate their age.

Seventy nine of the women were married, 38 separated, 35 single, 24 divorced, and 8 widowed. Twenty three did not indicate their marital status.

Only 12 clients did not have a high school diploma. There were 12 at the masters level or above. The rest had high school, some college or technical training, or a college degree.

In response to the statement "At present I am ..." the answers were as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| undecided what to do | 45 |
| thinking about a job | 54 |
| thinking about school | 54 |
| thinking about non traditional | 21 |
| looking for work | 103 |
| attending school | 4 |
| working part time | 31 |
| working full time | 18 |
| doing volunteer work | 12 |
| in a special program | 6 |

In order of the frequency of response PROBE was seen as being able to help by giving information (118), one-to-one counseling (71), a job hunting

workshop (69), a self awareness workshop (30), a job survival workshop (28), and a family engineering workshop (14).

There are a number of general principles that have evolved during the first year of the program. In working with women like the ones described earlier certain need patterns become evident even when the personal life situations are entirely different. These needs influence the direction of the project and the tone of the counseling.

It did not take long to realize that one of the most important aspects of the counseling program was for the counselor to be a responsive listener. Many of the clients need someone to talk to about their feelings, their confusion about what to do and/or their plans or dreams. Listening and giving feedback helps the client focus and decide upon options. Frequently, the client will answer her own question or solve her own problem and not realize it until the counselor points it out.

This kind of active listening serves to lift self confidence and motivate people to work toward their goal. Women who have been working in the home for a number of years often have low opinions of their abilities. They benefit from reviewing their accomplishments and assessing their skills. A woman may begin an interview by saying that all she can do is scrub floors. Most often after discussing what she has been doing during the past years, she comes to realize that she does in fact have a variety of valuable skills.

Along with selling themselves short, many women do not plan life goals. A favorite question of employment interviewers is "Where do expect to be five

years?" Many women have not thought that far ahead. Besides the short range goal of getting a job, women who come to PROBE are encouraged to think about the kind of work they want to be doing in the future and to make decisions based on those goals.

While some people are interested in returning to school or are not seriously looking for work, the goal of the majority of clients is employment. Therefore, information about the mechanics of the job search is most often sought. Names of people to talk to and places to apply are important.

One final principle which is an aspect of the counseling, workshop and support groups is the sharing of ideas and encouragement women can give each other. The support, especially when it is mutual can often provide the kind of impetus a woman need to succeed at what she has decided to do with her future.

Future

The PROBE staff is also planning for the future. The project has been refunded for another year. The parts of the program now in progress will continue with some improvements and refinements. New ideas are being planned. These include a job fair, a non-traditional career education program, and several publications. It is certain that whatever programs are developed they will be geared toward the successful reentry or promotion of women in the labor force.

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## ABSTRACT

PROBE, Potential Reentry Opportunities in Business and Education, is a program designed to assist people, primarily women, who are reentering the labor force or school after working in the home for a number of years. Funded by the Higher Education Act, Title I, and administered by The Pennsylvania State University, PROBE is based in the Dauphin County Library, Harrisburg, PA. The program has two primary components. The counseling/networking component includes information/referral counseling, a job availability service, a resource center, workshops, and support groups. The business/ industry component consists of employer contact, information sharing luncheons, and seminars. PROBE aims to help reentry women meet their needs.

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